

# LESLEY VANCE

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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At Bowdoin, this exhibition is, as always, made possible through the dedication of a small staff. We would also like to thank our colleagues in the Department of Visual Arts for co-sponsoring Lesley's conversation with Mark Wethli, A. LeRoy Greason Professor of Art, and for inviting her to be a part of their classes.

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Back cover illustration: *Untitled (24)*, 2009  
oil on linen, 19 x 16 in.

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All images courtesy of the artist and David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles.

## FOREWORD

It is with great pleasure that the Bowdoin College Museum of Art presents the first solo museum exhibition of work by Los Angeles-based artist Lesley Vance (born 1977). Since her inclusion in the Whitney Museum of American Art's Biennial Exhibition in 2010, Lesley has gained a passionate following among artists, critics, and collectors, and rightfully so. Deemed "as demanding as they are satisfying" by *Los Angeles Times* critic David Pagel, Vance's oil paintings reflect the return of beauty in recent years, one that is intellectually rigorous, highly accessible despite its abstraction, mysterious and evocative, and yet strangely barbed.

Vance (who earned her bachelor of fine arts degree at the University of Wisconsin at Madison in 2000 and completed the master of fine arts program at the California Institute of the Arts in 2003) works from within the history of art, looking to seventeenth-century still-life painting and late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century avant-garde artists who were likewise casting their gaze back. Her work, then, becomes something of a retrospective intervention. As she has explained, "There wasn't much abstraction that felt warm and intimate, abstraction that works like representation and invites you in."

We take pride at Bowdoin in continuing a tradition of exhibiting emerging artists of Lesley Vance's caliber. In doing so, we invite the college community as well as our larger regional constituencies to contribute to what amounts to a foundational dialogue between past and future.

**KEVIN SALATINO**

Director

Bowdoin College Museum of Art

## CONSPIRING FORMS

Lesley Vance has studied the oils of Baroque Spanish artists like Francisco de Zurbarán and Juan Sánchez Cotán. Indeed, her early work dramatized the still life in a manner consistent with theirs and, at the same, lacking their guile. Their characteristic ledge became the austere shadow box in which she composed objects in her studio. Vance's oils are vertical in format, forgoing allusions to the iconographic bounty of tabletops and windowsills. Most significantly, where Zurbarán and Cotán concerned themselves with the solidity and enumeration of objects, fetishizing their disclosure, Vance has instead pursued their sublime transformation.

Working from photographs of her still-life arrangements, Vance not only estranges herself from the physical objects, but also permits the photographs to insinuate themselves representationally. The photographic medium can effectively collapse distance, blunting perceptions of spatial relationships and, in this case, exaggerating the already flat faces of leaves or bark, for example. Photographs can also render cast shadows more solid and coextensive. Vance absorbs these shadows into her paintings, treating them as hardened forms fused to the other constituent elements.

There is an uncanny unity to the pictorial events in these oils. In some, this continuity is accomplished through the centripetal force applied by trussing brushwork around the perimeter (p.12). Not only do the elements in the image appear to cohere in the center of the composition, but they also seem to sit on its surface, coexisting on a single plane. Subjected to a number of deformations, the original objects have by now become insubstantial, their three-dimensionality shaved paper-thin. It is where Vance suggests the edge of a flat surface seen straight on that depth is most persuasively established. In one painting (p.10), she describes what appears to be almost a Möbius strip, the topological surface with a single side, roughly like a twisted cylinder in appearance. This undulating white ribbon serves as the boundary of forms that seem also to belong to it.

Even as they suture a collective to which they are subordinated, Vance's marks are spaces with interior autonomy. She works quickly, moving skeins of paint across the linen surface, scraping it with a palette knife, and turning sharp corners. What appears to be texture created by additive means (as though something folded was impressed into the paint surface) is in fact coming from underneath. In thinning the paint with her knife, Vance lets it catch on the irregular field of marks left during the original application of gesso to the fabric. This produces a film of paint ghosted by the linen weave and the first encounters between palette knife and fabric.

In her more recent paintings, the thronging forms have scattered and now, shard-like, exhibit an even more dissipated materiality. The palette has also changed considerably, reverting to a more brooding, Spanish-influenced one, and the optical ambiguity has become much more pronounced. At times, one feels as though one is looking through a porous surface, only stealing glimpses of what exists beyond it. In one oil (p.8), the dark passages of the image (I hesitate to use the word "ground" given the indeterminacy of relationships) seem to enfold and overtake the vestiges of the still life. Or is it the other way around? Do these foliate tendrils lift of their own accord, peeling away from the picture plane? Is this a painting coming undone?

One cannot say for certain. Still-life paintings are famously secretive, a sanctuary for conspiring forms. Historically, they have been allegorical dramas enacted by quotidian objects; in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries they became vehicles for radical experimentation with abstraction and mixed media assemblage. Artists like Paul Cézanne, Pablo Picasso, Arthur Dove, Marsden Hartley, and Man Ray (to name only a very few) staged their aesthetic insurrections within the space of the genre. Lesley Vance revisits this painterly history of objects, offering a rejoinder to it.

**DIANA TUI TE**

Exhibition Curator

## IN CONVERSATION

In the course of working on the exhibition, curator Diana Tuite exchanged a series of e-mails with the artist.

**DT:** You have indicated that you work from arrangements of objects, many of them natural, which you photograph under very particular lighting in your studio. Can you please say something about this process?

**LV:** I choose objects that I want to see together—often selecting particular forms because of their color, textures, shape . . . there are some objects I really enjoy painting, and I will pick these out to become part of new still lifes over and over. I arrange them in a darkened cardboard box and then cut various holes to experiment with lighting. It's about what happens between all of these things—the objects, the background, the light and darks—when they come together.

**DT:** What do these photographic intermediaries offer you that you would not access if you painted directly from life?

**LV:** The photograph provides a kind of distance that allows me to view the objects less as a representation of something I know and more as a group of forms. In a way this is the first part of my process that moves the objects into the realm of abstraction.

**DT:** How have the paintings evolved from those earlier compositions in which you foregrounded aspects of the object's staging (i.e., the box) and painted much more overtly within the lexicon of seventeenth-century still-life painting?

**LV:** What always attracted me to seventeenth-century still lifes, particularly Spanish artists like Francisco de Zurbarán and Juan Sánchez Cotán, was how the brightly lit, saturated colors of the objects set upon stark black backgrounds created a kind of surreal environment—an unreal space where a nearly-fluorescent yellow lemon begins to morph into a non-objective form. For me it is as if Zurbarán's lemons and oranges staged against this darkness almost

become celestial orbs. But in the end the representation always holds them back from completing that transformation, and this was what I found happened in my own representational paintings. What was happening in my own mind was not happening for anyone else.

**DT:** The shadows cast by these objects survive within your paintings, but in a variety of forms. Some recede, suggesting responses to light, while others assume the character of solid formal elements, projecting and enfolding parts of the composition, exaggerating their flatness. Could you say a little bit about the role that black plays in your paintings?

**LV:** I use black to complicate pictorial space—to break it up, to open up the space of the canvas into deeper depths, but also to emphasize hard edges and sometimes to counteract the gestural softness present in my forms. It is important to keep some shadow—the shadows created from light hitting form are as much the subject for me as the object itself.

**DT:** Where do the more recent watercolors fit in? They are almost like drawings on Mylar in their transparency and incandescence.

**LV:** These watercolors have become so important to my painting practice. With watercolor, there is a quality that is both similar to, and totally different from, how I move oil paint around, and this



Francisco de Zurbarán, Spanish, 1598–1664 *Still Life with Lemons, Oranges, and A Rose*, 1663, oil on canvas. The Norton Simon Foundation, Pasadena, California



*Untitled (25)*, 2009  
oil on linen  
19 x 15 in.  
Collection of Ninah  
and Michael Lynne



creates an interesting space where unexpected things happen and impact my paintings. And it's very easy to experiment with color and compositions. The watercolors are always reworkable, whereas my painting medium dries in a day or two, so I could come back to a watercolor a month later if I wanted and rework it, and it maintains its freshness. This feeling is important to me—it is why I work wet-on-wet in my paintings and complete them in one or two days. My process is not additive—I never want a viewer to follow the steps backward or think about how the painting came together. Although there is a quality resembling collage in the works, all the forms sit in one layer, and I think this adds to the mystery of the compositions.



**DT:** There is a certain way that your paintings perform topological inquiries—subjecting continuous plastic forms to deformations. One thinks of artist Terry Winters’s knots, for example. What does this process of abstraction and testing look like for you?

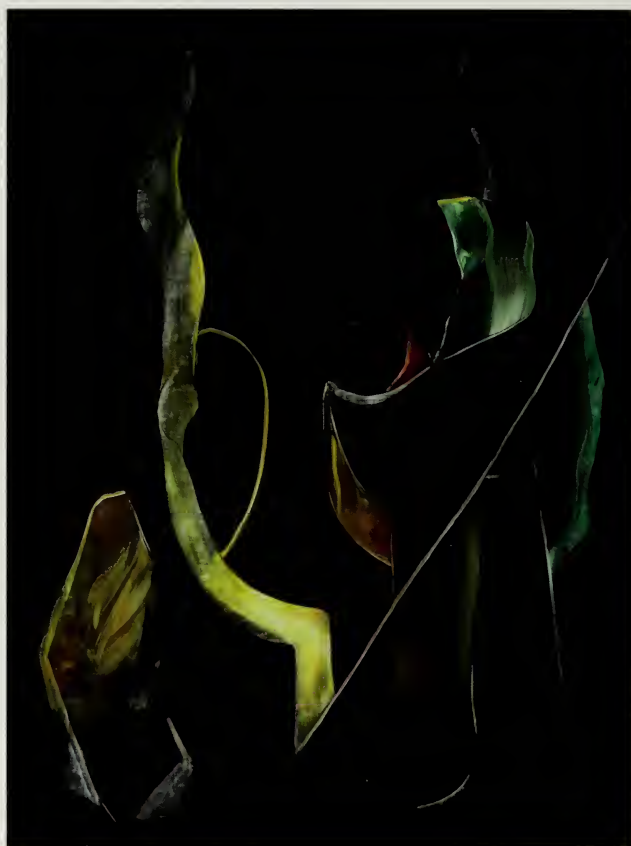
**LV:** I think of the paintings as being in a constant state of transformation—almost as if the painting has stopped in this moment and has been suspended there. It is one of the reasons why a painting in general is so impossible to describe, because it possesses its own peculiar quality of time. I am always thinking about the plasticity of form. In my work many actions lead to the final image, and yet when I look at my paintings I can imagine them existing in a different way at a future point, so they somehow exist in a few dimensions of time at once—if that makes sense. And although there are many erasures, many moments of completely irrational periods of frustration leading to destruction that go on over the course of my making a painting, in the end it must feel like it made itself. I begin with the still life, which is one subject, and then as I work that gradually goes away, and I am working and working until the moment arrives finally when the painting becomes its own material subject. I am waiting for a new subject, and for that time when the painting declares itself and asserts its existence in the world.

**DT:** Do you consider certain works to belong loosely to any kind of series? Are there specific problems or questions that you take away from one composition and use as the starting point for another?

**LV:** Each painting is subject to its own set of new rules. No matter what plan I have when I begin, like telling myself I am going to try what I did in this painting or that—it never seems to happen.

**DT:** I think of your work as making a retrospective intervention into some of the early twentieth-century vanguard’s experiments with abstraction. Artists like Marcel Duchamp and Man Ray (in his paintings and his rayographs both) . . . do you see any continuity with those projects?

*Untitled, 2011*  
oil on linen  
19 ½ x 14 ½ in.  
The Rachofsky Collection



**LV:** I hope so. I am always thinking about surrealism, particularly de Chirico and Magritte, but also artists like Arthur Dove, Hans and Sophie Tauber Arp, or even Hilma af Klint—artists who really did their own weird thing in the context of their time, and whose work possesses a kind of idiosyncratic intimacy.

**DT:** I have been struck by how much your paintings can assume the affect of collage in their playing at flatness and depth, superimposition and simultaneity. And, in particular, how much they almost seem to take up the work of Lee Krasner's collages, many of them incorporating cut fragments from her other paintings.



Lee Krasner, American, 1908–1984. *Milkweed*, 1955, oil, paper and canvas collage on canvas. Gift of Seymour H. Knox Jr., Albright-Knox Gallery, Buffalo, New York. Photo courtesy Albright-Knox Art Gallery/Art Resource, NY. ©ARS, NY.

**LV:** With the Krasner collages there is this act of applying pieces to construct new images from cut shapes that I can relate to. It makes for a painting that's both more sculptural and has a specific kind of depth. With my own works often what I'm unconsciously aiming for is a type of sculptural space, both with the shapes and the space they are located in, in the painting. The qualities related to collage occur because I like to disrupt the flatness of the painting surface by playing with illusionism at times in my work. I think about how Magritte broke up space in a way that felt a lot like collage as well, though making collages wasn't a significant part of his practice. It is the same for me—I never make them, but in the end the works often have that feel. I don't want the painting to be read as literally as a true collage; I am after something that is more mysterious and strange. If I think of collage in terms of it being rooted in chance composition, this is also interesting as it relates to my process because it's those forms that appear unexpectedly while I am painting that often guide or solve the problem the painting is posing during its making—so perhaps this is also how collage fits in.

*Untitled (18)*, 2009  
oil on linen  
18 x 16 in  
Collection of Steve Martin  
and Anne Stringfield



DT: How does it feel to be a painter in the twenty-first century?

LV: I rewatched *Painters Painting* recently and was struck by how there really are no movements now to contend with, no theoretical dogmas to follow or react against. While of course I already knew this, that film is the closest I can get to understanding what that must have *felt* like. I do always get asked about the “representation vs. abstraction” issue. I don’t see this as an issue that requires debate anymore. I think abstraction is rooted in representation, and that the two exist together with a healthy friction, where there’s never one that has priority over the other—the idea of a painting being resolved to me mentally and materially is what is important.



*Untitled (14)*, 2009  
oil on linen  
16 x 12 in.  
Private Collection, New York





*Untitled (36)*, 2010  
oil on linen  
16 x 12 in  
Private Collection, Malibu



*Untitled*, 2011  
oil on linen  
12 x 10 in.  
Collection of Gary Garrels  
and Richard Hoblock





*Untitled*, 2011  
oil on linen  
14 x 11 in  
Collection of Nancy and  
Nate Kacew, New York



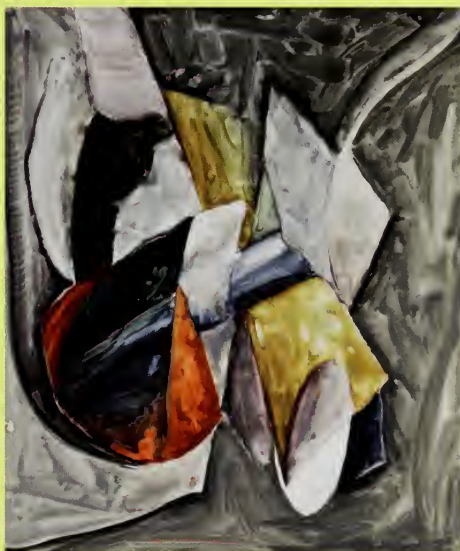
*Untitled*, 2011  
oil on linen  
18 x 15 in.  
Collection of Martin and  
Rebecca Eisenberg



*Untitled*, 2011  
oil on linen  
18 x 14 in.  
Collection of Glenn and  
Amanda Fuhrman, New York  
Courtesy The FLAG Art Foundation



*Untitled, 2011*  
 watercolor  
 7 <sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 6 in.  
 Collection of Martin and  
 Rebecca Eisenberg



*Untitled, 2011*  
 watercolor  
 6 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 5 <sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in.  
 The Rachofsky Collection

